

# Terminate those cover crops

By JOSH FLINT

**F**OR many farmers, 2012 marked their first foray into cover crops.

On top of typical planting stress, those first-timers (who didn't plant something that winterkills) probably have another thought running through their head about now. "Can I kill it?"

At the 2013 Cover Crops Conference

## Key Points

- Terminating cover crops is a bit easier with some tips from experts.
- Wait for the third or fourth consecutive warm day before spraying.
- Don't spray glyphosate four to six hours before sunset on cover crops.

in Decatur, multiple experts spoke on this exact topic. The good news is, most cover crops are fairly easy to take out with a burndown pass. But the timing of that burndown comes with several trade-offs.

Chris Kamienski, a Monsanto technology representative, classifies spray timing in two categories. Early removal is more than three weeks before corn planting. Late removal is less than three



weeks before corn planting.

Both come with advantages and disadvantages. For those who spray early, smaller plants may be easier to kill. Terminating the cover crop before the weather really warms up also helps prevent insects from calling the lush, green field home. Of course, time is short in spring. Spraying early adds flexibility to a busy schedule.

Spraying early also means the field misses out on significant spring root growth, nitrogen recovery, weed suppression and maximum biomass. Many folks will sacrifice those benefits at the risk of not being able to kill a much larger plant.

Speaking of plant size, Kamienski reminded farmers to consider the roots as part of the entire length. A few inches of top growth could come with a root that is several feet deep. That's one big reason it's important to use full herbicide rates.

Lastly, Kamienski strongly advised against letting a cover crop reach its reproductive stage. Many of these crops can become weeds in a typical corn-soybean rotation.

"You do not want a cover crop establishing a seed bank in your field," he added.

## Spray timing is critical

The next step is finding the perfect window to spray. Most will be tempted to spray when it's still too cold.

Kamienski says the perfect time is on the third or fourth consecutive warm day. What constitutes warm? Daytime highs above 55 degrees F and nighttime lows above 40 degrees F will suffice.

Many herbicides, like glyphosate, use the plant's metabolism to translocate within the plant's various structures. Coming out of winter, it takes a few days for the plant's metabolism to speed up and assist with translocation.

"You need a couple of days of warmer temperatures for the plant to say, 'OK, I believe you, it's getting warmer,'" quips Illinois cover crop specialist Mike Plumer.

If using glyphosate to burn down cover crops, Plumer has another timing tip: Stop spraying four to six hours before sunset.

Again, the reason is metabolism-related. On shorter winter days, plant metabolism slows down during the night. In various cover crop experiments, Plumer has found metabolism actually slows well before nightfall.

He remembers one instance where he sprayed multiple plots a few hours before sundown. The glyphosate was completely ineffective. Unfortunately, the application simply "ticked it off." Plumer had a very difficult time terminating those plots.

As for morning dew, Plumer says it's not necessary to wait for the dew to completely evaporate. So long as the dew isn't extremely heavy, he isn't worried about the herbicide washing off.

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